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Version of attached file:

Published Version

Peer-review status of attached file:

Peer-reviewed

Citation for published item:

Fox, J. C. (2006) 'Millions like us? Accented language and the 'ordinary' in British films of the Second World War.', *Journal of British studies.*, 45 (4). pp. 819-845.

Further information on publisher's website:

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1086/505959>

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Millions Like Us? Accented Language and the “Ordinary” in British Films of the Second World War

Jo Fox

Give the public a film about ordinary people; we do get so tired of our heroines with Oxford accents. (*Picture Goer Weekly*, 1941)¹

“Are all soldiers Cockneys? Or are all Cockneys soldiers?” (Letter to *Radio Times*, 9 February 1940)²

To the British mind, accent has long been an indicator of social status and individual or collective identities. During the Second World War, it came to play a significant role in defining the new social positioning resultant from the cultural construct of the “people’s war.” At a time when British propagandists concentrated on the image of the “ordinary” man and woman and, in particular, their integration within the organic whole, the problem of social identity was brought into sharp focus, representing the nation reconfigured. In attempting to connect the wider populace with the war effort and the drive for unity, propagandists knew that representations of the “ordinary” had to be realistic, creating an individualized, personal identification with the role of the “everyman” and foregrounding “his” experience. Naturally, accent and language played a key role in this process, featuring prominently in appeals set within the “people’s

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¹ Mass-Observation Archive, Special Collections, University of Sussex Library (hereafter M-O A): Topic Collection (hereafter TC) 17/5/B, letters to *Picture Goer*: British Films. Letter from R.V., Harrow, 1 January 1941.

² Letter to *Radio Times*, 9 February 1940. Quoted in Sian Nicholas, *The Echo of War: Home Front Propaganda and the Wartime BBC, 1939–45* (Manchester, 1996), 239.

Journal of British Studies 45 (October 2006): 819–845
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medium,” film. While much scholarly work has dealt with the image of the “people’s war” in British cinema from 1939 to 1945 and beyond, little comment has been made on the pervasive role of dialect, accent, and scripting.

This article seeks to redress this omission by analyzing some of the ways in which cinema explored the ordinary, seizing upon the importance of accent and language in attempting to create a realistic portrait of Britain at war. Rather than testing the authenticity of the images presented to the British public, it analyzes the motives of the filmmakers, examining the ways in which dialogue was used in documentary and fictional film productions. It also explores how filmmakers used linguistic methods in cinema portraits of the “average hero” and the problems that producers encountered in trying to do so. The study reveals the development of the image of the ordinary within the master narrative of the people’s war and highlights the innate connection between the cinematic documentary movement and its commercial counterpart.

Some studies contend that both the nontheatrical and theatrical documentary and the fictional feature operated within parallel contexts but on separate paths. However, by viewing the two forms of cinema as interconnected, this article seeks to challenge the view that “the real propaganda *war* was carried out in the commercial cinema [and] . . . not in any significant way by the documentary film.”³ It was the documentary movement that gave cinematic identity to the popular conception of class, regional, and gender constructs. In turn, this profoundly influenced the development of images of the ordinary and the people’s war articulated within the fictional feature. Although the documentary film, on the whole, reached far fewer viewers than fictional studio productions, the adoption of documentary principles by commercial filmmakers demonstrated a willingness to adapt to the fluctuating needs of a society at war. Contrary to Nicholas Pronay’s view that “as far as the war effort was concerned,” the documentary film “could have [been] dispensed with . . . without an iota of difference,” the basic cultural codes it reflected, specifically in the representation of social identifiers, laid the foundations for the most popular cinematic expressions of the ordinary within British fictional wartime cinema.⁴ The use of accent and language was one of the most important devices in the formation of both the collective experience and individual identities, and this article seeks to examine first the construction of accented language within the documentary form and then to demonstrate how basic principles of this process were integrated into mainstream cinema.

It is difficult to judge precisely the success of this development in cinematic trends in creating a cultural environment for social change and the internalization of new forms of collective identity. In 1940, Tom Harrisson, one of the founders of Mass-Observation, an organization dedicated to analyzing the popular voice, identified three levels of opinion prevalent in modern societies: published, public, and private. Although, as Harrisson recognized, private opinion is the most desired by observers and historians, it is also the most difficult to access. It is improbable that, as Harrisson claimed, Mass-Observation could get close to penetrating the private world of the cinemagoer: “Watching audience responses,” he contended,

³ Nicholas Pronay, “‘The Land of Promise’: The Projection of Peace Aims in Britain,” in *Film and Radio Propaganda in World War II*, ed. K. R. M. Short (London, 1983), 72.

⁴ Ibid.

“gives the same sort of information about what is really going on in people’s minds as we get from intimate war diaries, or dream studies.”⁵ Nonetheless, the “darkness” of the theater undoubtedly provided “the privacy in which people could react as individual[s]” as well as within a group. Films themselves revealed “an immense range of human [situations, presenting] to the audience a great variety of emotional problems” to which reactions could be noted and analyzed.⁶ Such analysis was conducted by Mass-Observation, whose archives contain both broader responses to the film program and more specific reactions, such as the pattern of coughing or laughter in theaters.

Although Mass-Observation has been subject to continued scrutiny as to the reliability of its materials for the modern scholar, it should be remembered that its reports were not meant to be read as quantitative data. Rather, they were observations of everyday life.⁷ That Mass-Observers were recording life not necessarily as it was but rather as they and their subjects perceived it to be is helpful to the scholar attempting to understand popular attitudes to film and to propaganda constructs such as the image of the collective or the ordinary. Historians of Britain in the Second World War have seen this as the primary advantage of the collection, since the depth of its material “with its concurrent ambiguities, nuances and contradictions, [provides] a far richer account than the snap reaction to an opinion poll question.”⁸ This undercurrent of tensions within prevailing popular opinions is particularly relevant to the study of film, pointing to multiple desires on the part of the average cinemagoer and the complexities of patterns of audience response.

In addition, published information from trade newspapers, such as *Kinematograph Weekly* and *Today’s Cinema*, gives the historian an insight into the perceptions of trends in the industry from within. Of these publications, *Documentary News Letter* is the most controversial but also the most valuable for the historian seeking a window into the minds of those leading the documentary movement. Appearing for the first time in January 1940, this periodical clamored for recognition of film as an art form above the commercial product. Its writers consistently pressured the Ministry of Information and its Films Division to view film as a force in social education, and they complained that the trade press had erected artificial boundaries between entertainment and propaganda. This attitude began to erode the false distinction placed upon these two cinematic forms and led to what Andrew Higson terms “the wartime wedding” between the documentary and the fictional feature.⁹ Nowhere was this marriage more keenly observed than in the representation of the ordinary and in the use of authentic accented language.

⁵ M-O A: File Report (hereafter FR) 446, Tom Harrison, “Social Research and the Film,” November 1940. Also reproduced in *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, ed. Dorothy Sheridan and Jeffrey Richards (London, 1987), 209–17, 213, and *Documentary News Letter* 1, no. 11 (November 1940).

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ For more on Mass-Observation and their aims and organization, see Penny Summerfield, “Mass-Observation: Social Research or Social Movement?” *Journal of Contemporary History* 20, no. 3 (July 1985): 439–52.

⁸ Tony Kushner, “The Spice of Life? Ethnic Difference, Politics and Culture in Modern Britain,” in *Citizenship, Nationality, and Migration in Europe*, ed. David Cesarani and Mary Fullbrook (New York, 1996), 125–45, 130.

⁹ Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford, 1995), 42–43.

Although the device of dialect was brought into sharp focus during the Second World War, accent was an important factor in the popularity of individual films before the war's outbreak, notably in the late 1920s with the introduction of the "talking picture." The advent of the sound film meant that studios had to produce "audible and comprehensive speech."¹⁰ The "talkie" also presented new challenges in terms of representing social issues and identities. In the cinema, accent and language came to signify social status, just as much as sets, milieus, and costumes did. Class was no longer codified solely by visual clues, for authentic speech placed characters "both geographically and socially." Accent, syntax, and "restricted [and elaborate] speech codes" created collective recognition of a character's status within a particular film and became an important tool for the filmmaker in the fashioning of a class- or region-specific scenario.¹¹ Significantly, sound also opened up broader distinctions between nations. The sound film highlighted the perception among the British public that accented language in American feature films represented a significant difference between American and British attitudes toward class.¹² Although the American accent would have potentially indicated status to cinemagoers in the United States, British audiences had little experience of cultural and social nuance within the American idiom. As George Perry observed of British films of the 1930s, "The British cinema had become a middle-class institution: it was the 'cultured' West-End accent that was heard and it was the *mores* of the country drawing room that were being observed. In Middlesbrough and Smethwick they opted for the classless accents of America, just as they preferred the slicker pace and the glossier technique."¹³ In short, throughout the 1930s, the most popular accent in film was "American." As Winifred Holtby's fictional piece *South Riding* (1936) suggested, there was a growing awareness of language and its relationship to cinematic and broader cultural change. She wrote of her protagonist that "like most of her generation and locality, Elsie was trilingual. She talked BBC English to her employer, Cinema American to her companions and Yorkshire dialect to old milkmen."¹⁴

However, Tony Aldgate has pointed to evidence from the early 1930s that implies that "the public at first found . . . American accents bewildering," causing them to miss much of the dialogue.¹⁵ This problem was particularly acute among working-class and northern cinemagoers, who "exercised a strong suspicion, not to say hatred, of the American idiom."¹⁶ Nevertheless, as audiences became ac-

¹⁰ John Ellis, "Victory of the Voice?" *Screen* 22, no. 2 (1981): 69–72, 70.

¹¹ Philip Gillett, *The British Working Class in Post-war Film* (Manchester, 2003), 19–20.

¹² Sue Harper and Vincent Porter, *British Cinema of the 1950s: The Decline of Deference* (Oxford, 2003), 251.

¹³ George Perry cited in Charles Barr, *Ealing Studios*, 3rd ed. (Berkeley, 1998), 26. See also Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England, 1918–1951* (Oxford, 1998), 434.

¹⁴ Quoted in Tony Aldgate, "Comedy, Class and Containment: The British Domestic Cinema of the 1930s," in *British Cinema History*, ed. James Curran and Vincent Porter (London, 1983), 257–71, 261.

¹⁵ John Montgomery, *Comedy Films* (London, 1954), 179. Quoted in Aldgate, "Comedy, Class and Containment," 261.

¹⁶ Jeff Nuttall, *King Twist: A Portrait of Frank Randle* (London, 1978), 14. Quoted in Aldgate, "Comedy, Class and Containment," 261. For evidence of continued resistance to American culture in Britain, see Richard Weight, *Patriots: National Identity in Britain, 1940–2000* (Basingstoke, 2002), 178.

customed to the American accent, they began to prefer U.S. films to the home-grown product, partly due to the fact that film audiences displayed a negative reaction to the British standardization of accented language necessary for comprehensible speech in early cinema. As McKibbin commented, "Most widely disliked [among audiences] was the accent of the actors and, even more, the actresses. The talkie had cruelly exposed the British film. There were almost immediate complaints about the 'prissiness' and the 'stageyness' of the diction, of 'by joves' and 'I says', 'Oxford accents' and 'BBC voices'."¹⁷ With the voice of the stage rather than the screen came an awareness among the cinemagoing public that British film actors were less realistic than American actors and that their dialogue was "'on a scale and tempo' that might be acceptable in the theatre but not in the cinema."¹⁸ Moreover, accented language exposed a gulf between the "Oxford" characters on screen and the largely working-class cinemagoers in the United Kingdom.¹⁹

In this new environment, working-class regional accents in film were well received by the British public, as demonstrated by the fact that Lancashire legends George Formby and Gracie Fields were among the most popular stars of stage and screen from about 1937 to 1943.²⁰ Throughout their film careers, their accents remained "as thick and strong as hotpot." The popular songs drawn from film and other performances were "built around dialect expressions"; "A Lad fra Lancashire," "Eee by Gum," and "Owt about Nowt" are but a few examples.²¹ Formby and Fields's heavy regional accent in part fulfilled the public's desire to hear a variety of dialects that grounded both character and plot and also tapped into the general public's fondness for the music hall style. Formby and Fields performed a specific function within the United Kingdom in providing a focal point for identity and a comfort to audiences in the 1930s and 1940s. Film critic C. A. Lejeune noted that "our George, like our Gracie, stands for something strong and tough and homely in a jittery world."²² In this sense, their appeal went far beyond the northwest of England: "Fields and Formby were more than simply Lancashire stars. They became national stars . . . [and] symbols of the people."²³ Given that "each individual has a multiple set of identities which operate at different times and under different circumstances," it was entirely conceivable that cinemagoers could "associate with local, regional, national, social, class, ethnic, religious and gender identities . . . and yet hold common British affiliation," the most popular stars achieving "their popularity by appealing to all of these multiple identities."²⁴

¹⁷ McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 433.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ The National Archives: Public Record Office (hereafter TNA: PRO) RG 23/44, Wartime Social Survey, DC 48532/1.

²⁰ *Cinema*, 1 January 1941, 5. As Jeffrey Richards notes, "Fields was the top female star at the cinema box office from 1936–1940 and Formby the top male star from 1937–1943" (Richards, *Stars in Our Eyes: Lancashire Stars of Stage, Screen, and Radio* [Preston, 1994], 10).

²¹ Jeffrey Richards, *Films and British National Identity: From Dickens to Dad's Army* (Manchester, 1997), 258.

²² Ibid. Note use of "our."

²³ Richards, *Stars in Our Eyes*, 10.

²⁴ Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, 1; John Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing in 1930s Britain: A Choice of Pleasures* (Exeter, 2000), 102; Jeffrey Richards, "Cinemagoing in Worktown: Regional Film Audiences in 1930s Britain," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 14, no. 2 (1994): 147–66, 164.

Although recent research suggests that prior to the Second World War the draw of “regional” stars was limited, pointing to distinct class and regional preferences, the onset of war heightened the need to invoke national unity.²⁵ Formby, in particular, found his niche within wartime Britain.²⁶ Formby’s regional identity created a “point of universal identification” in demonstrating the power of the “little man who wins through against the odds.” His knockout blow to a rather surprised Hitler in *Let George Do It* (Marcel Varnel, 1940) became “the visual encapsulation of the People’s War with the English Everyman flooring the Nazi Superman.”²⁷ In many ways, the ideal of the people’s war, fusing the various elements of British society, forced filmmakers to confront the problems of their national cinema with regard to representing that “everyman.” The nature of the conflict suggested that the film industry should engage with the British population and present them with a redefined image of themselves, one that was in accordance with the stated propaganda needs of the nation. It was in this environment that linguistic devices within cinematic productions came to be a key means of constructing the image of people’s war.²⁸ This appeal across class and regional divides overturned trends in the use of accented language within film. The experiments with sound in the 1930s led to a polarization of representation on the screen. Although “Oxford-English” was preferred by the studios because of its audibility and perceived classlessness, it was still the accent of the “metropolitan urban upper-middle class,” with its “extra inflection towards clarity and enunciation.” Such “class-bound” accents were consistently used for “serious dramatic material, for light comedy, for newsreel commentaries, for documentary voice-overs,” whereas the music hall, regional voice was reserved for “low-budget” low comedy.²⁹ In this way, “regional and class differences were deviations measured from the basis of stage standard English, and could only appear in the guise of minor and/or comic characterizations.”³⁰ The result was that, during the 1930s, “a hierarchy of voice was instituted: stage standard English could speak facts and emotions, anything serious and of importance; the various representations of regional accents (themselves tempered by the need for universal intelligibility) could speak only that which revealed a limited understanding.”³¹ The Second World War, and specifically the cultural construct of the people’s war, necessitated a change, demanding the dominance of “authenticity” over “clarity” and foregrounding regional and class identities. During the Second World War, both the media and the propaganda service used more varied accents in their attempt to create a culture applicable to all. The British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) was the key innovator in this respect. The war-time broadcasting service “made a conscious effort to broadcast nationally a com-

²⁵ Sedgwick, *Popular Filmgoing*, 111–12, 119.

²⁶ For comments on the popularity of Formby, see *ibid.*, 192–93.

²⁷ Richards, *Films and British National Identity*, 261.

²⁸ TNA: PRO INF 1/724, memorandum by the International Broadcasting and Propaganda Enquiry, 21 June 1939. Reprinted in full in Phillip M. Taylor, “Techniques of Persuasion: Basic Ground Rules of British Propaganda during the Second World War,” *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television* 1, no. 1 (1981): 57–65. The sense of engaging the public is prevalent throughout the document.

²⁹ Ellis, “Victory of the Voice?” 71.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

prehensive representation of regional dialects and class accents, in talks, discussions, features and light entertainment.”³² This was despite an increasingly minority view that “it is as well for a man not to be handicapped by a bad accent,” as Professor C. E. M. Joad, panelist for the *Brains Trust*, commented in April 1942.³³ The most popular broadcasters of the day, such as J. B. Priestley and Wilfred Pickles, had soft regional accents and proved to be extremely popular with audiences looking for representations of the ordinary. Despite some complications, such as the English and Welsh being unable to understand some regional dialects such as Highland Scottish, the BBC became adept at “letting the people speak for themselves,” or, at the very least, creating the appearance of such. This challenged both the traditional “BBC English” that had become standard fare before the outbreak of war and the dominance of the intellectual elites. As W. E. Williams, director of the Army Bureau of Current Affairs, commented, “The Brahmins who bother their heads about the morale of the working classes could learn confidence and possible humility if they listened now and then, on the air and off it, to the authentic Voice of the People.”³⁴

By 1942, realism and the ordinary had become a key method of communicating, in a meaningful way, with the “everyman.” The BBC recognized that “it is the man who has an accent who carries conviction.”³⁵ Accent was increasingly used by the BBC as a means of creating a sense of inclusivity, an indication that broadcasts were intended to convey the sense of “our” war. Broadcasters were conscious of the need to explore and accept class and regional diversity, tapping into the public desire to identify with the messages they received from the media and official organs of publicity. In attempting to diversify the range of dialects on the radio, the BBC conformed to government objectives relating to the propaganda of the people’s war. In April 1941, the Home Publicity Sub-committee of the Ministry of Information, Britain’s wartime propaganda agency, recognized that it was necessary to “inspire and sustain a feeling of close identity between people and government in order to avoid the danger of sections of the home public getting into the habit of thinking in terms of ‘their’ war instead of ‘our’ war.”³⁶ They recommended that home publicity should mount a “propaganda offensive,” using the idea of the people’s war as a central theme.³⁷

Film was viewed as an essential medium for this purpose. As it was one of the most popular forms of entertainment and communication among the wider masses, it had a good chance of reaching those that the ministry wished to target. The Wartime Social Survey of 1943 found that “in the lower economic group the proportion of frequent cinema goers is higher.” Cinema was specifically adept at attracting “high proportions of workers in light manufacturing and in the clerical, distributive and miscellaneous groups [who] go to the cinema once a week or

³² Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 239.

³³ C. E. M. Joad, *The Listener* (BBC house journal), 16 April 1942. Quoted in Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 262 n. 54.

³⁴ W. E. Williams, *The Listener*, 2 April 1942. Quoted in Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 240.

³⁵ East to Hyndley, BBC Written Archive Centre R 34/672/1, 10 July 1942. Quoted in Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 100.

³⁶ TNA: PRO INF 1/251, from Francis Williams to Sir Kenneth Clark, Home Planning Executive Sub-committee, 16 April 1941.

³⁷ Ibid.

more.” Eighty percent of those who proclaimed themselves to be “cinema enthusiasts” were from the lower economic groups. Cinema was also a good means of communicating to regional audiences, with the survey concluding that “the North region . . . shows a high proportion of frequent cinema goers.”³⁸ *Documentary News Letter* proclaimed in November 1940: “Film has a special capability to provide a *long-term* vision by rendering in visual form the basic ideas and needs of a generation.” Film, it claimed, could “do an immense amount to bridge the long-criticized gap between bureaucracy and democracy” and put an end to the perception that “politicians, Whitehall-ites, public relations officers, local government officials and Bloomsbury googies . . . are completely out of touch with real people.”³⁹

Although *Documentary News Letter* was primarily concerned with promoting realism in film and the Griersonian style of representation, the view that the government had to use film to reconnect with its citizenry was confirmed by Mass-Observation.⁴⁰ Comparing two early Ministry productions, *Channel Incident* (Anthony Asquith, 1940) and *The Front Line* (Harry Watt, 1940), *Documentary News Letter* urged filmmakers to present images that were “both truthful and decent” and that allowed “the people [to] speak for themselves.” Films had a duty to be about “us,” they claimed, “from the bowler-hatted Mayor standing on the promenade and saying ‘Dover’s all right’ to the housewife with her story of the electric light which turned itself on when a shell burst; from the nonchalant look-out man counting the seconds between the Calais gun-flash and the ruination of a Dover church, to the Doric enthusiasm of the successful A.A. gun team,” and not “them,” that “miserable section of the citizenry” castigated by Priestley in his Sunday-night broadcasts.⁴¹

The cinematic shift to depicting the ordinary relied on the creation of convincing portraits of the average man and woman at war, and accent and authentic dialogue were key devices in this process. The Boulting brothers, Roy and John, foregrounded accent and dialogue in their 1940 film *Dawn Guard*, a touching story of a conversation between an old and a young man of the Home Guard, set in southwest England.⁴² Building upon their utopian visions, the protagonist’s soliloquy underlined the promise of the future. His accent, colloquial phraseology, and syntax carefully attempted to identify with the target audience and give a specific, recognizable voice to the hopes for the postwar world:

³⁸ TNA: PRO RG 23/44, Wartime Social Survey, DC 48532/1, 1943. Nicholas Pronay contends that the lower economic groups also made up the majority of cinemagoers in the prewar period (Pronay, “The ‘Moving Picture’ and Historical Research,” in “Historians and Movies: The State of the Art, Part I,” special issue, *Journal of Contemporary History* 18, no. 3 [July 1983]: 365–95).

³⁹ “Films and a People’s War: A Discussion of the Basic Principles of Propaganda in This War,” *Documentary News Letter*, November 1940, 3–4.

⁴⁰ M-O A: FR 90, Morale: Channels of Publicity, 14 April 1940. The Griersonian style is the particular form of documentary associated with the filmmaker John Grierson. Grierson was adamant that the documentary should be as realistic as possible in its representation of the ordinary. For Grierson, film was not so much about aesthetics as observation. For more on this, see Grierson, “The Documentary Idea” (1942), in *The Documentary Film Movement: An Anthology*, ed. Ian Aitken (Edinburgh, 1998), 103–15.

⁴¹ “Films and a People’s War,” 3.

⁴² For more on the Bouldings’ vision of the postwar utopia in this film, see the interview with Roy Boulting, March 1980, held in the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive (hereafter IWMS) 4627/6.

Look at that Dunkirk. Wasn't no unemployed there. Every man had a job to do and he done it. That's what we gotta see they 'ave in peacetime—a job. There'll be work enough when this lot's over. Building up something new and better 'an what's been destroyed. There mustn't be no more chaps 'anging around for work what don't come. No more slums neither. No more dirty filthy back streets and no more 'alf starved kids with no room to play in. . . . We can't go back to the old way of livin' . . . at least not all of it. That's gone forever. And the sooner we've all made up our minds about that the better. We've gotta all pull together—that's 'ow I look at it anyway. We found out in this war as how we're all neighbours and we 'aven't gotta forget it when it's all over.

Although the unambiguous use of accent was intended to appeal to the wider construct of the nation by transcending traditional barriers and eliminating societal tensions, the film failed to promote a sense of inclusivity. Failing to include the “British” in its vision of the people's war, it was poorly received in Scotland, the solidly English focus and accented language obviating the broader task of forging a credible image.⁴³ Film had to respond, as Geoff Eley has observed, to “a complex of democratic traditions stressing decency, liberalism, and the importance of everyone pulling together, in a way that honored the value and values of ordinary working people.”⁴⁴

In this atmosphere and spirit the British public began to embrace, as Dilys Powell observed, “themes which would once have been thought too serious or controversial for the ordinary spectator . . . [becoming] receptive to the imaginative interpretation of everyday life.”⁴⁵ These interpretations needed a realistic medium to fulfill their aim of convincing the public that the war would promise a better future, that even during the war, as the Ministry of Information claimed in 1941, “schisms and party distinctions have largely disappeared,” and that “class distinctions . . . have also greatly declined.”⁴⁶ After all, the ministry believed that all distinction in terms of locality, region, and class had been replaced by “a new sense of purpose in life with a clear-cut objective in view—winning the war,” and it was film's task to reflect this idea of newfound unity.⁴⁷ Films such as the Ministry of Information short *Ordinary People* of 1941 (J. B. Holmes) began to give cinematic prominence to individuals “who secure no fame and who have no place in the headlines.”⁴⁸ Filmmakers defined their contribution to the war effort as attempting to convince the British public that the central role in the war was reserved for ordinary people. As filmmaker Harry Watt recalled of the 1941 film *Heart of*

⁴³ Michael Paris, “Filming the People's War: *The Dawn Guard*, *Desert Victory*, *Tunisian Victory*, and *Burma Victory*,” in *The Family Way: The Boulting Brothers and Postwar British Film Culture*, ed. Alan Burton, Tim O'Sullivan, and Paul Wells (Trowbridge, 2000), 97–109, 97.

⁴⁴ Geoff Eley, “Finding the People's War: Film, British Collective Memory, and World War II,” *American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (June 2001): 818–38, 837–38.

⁴⁵ Dilys Powell, *Films since 1939* (London, 1947), 39.

⁴⁶ TNA: PRO INF 1/292, Stephen Taylor, Home Intelligence, “Home Morale and Public Opinion: A Review of Some Conclusions Arising out of a Year of Home Intelligence Weekly Reports,” 1 October 1941, 7.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ TNA: PRO INF 6/330, working script for the Ministry of Information short film *Ordinary People* (1941).

Britain, "Our job was making films to win the war, to make the ordinary people proud and strong in themselves."⁴⁹

The Ministry of Information recognized that the most important factor in improving popular opinion and in ensuring that propaganda was accepted by the population was "personal experience."⁵⁰ Although film communicates visually, thus making a realistic setting essential to a successful piece, it also communicates by sound, in particular music and dialogue. The impact of a particular piece, at times, was dependent upon whether the characters were believable to those they were attempting to represent, and accent played a central role in this process. The ministry recognized not only that accents had to be real but also that it was essential that films avoided patronizing "those whose patronage they [were seeking]," for the public "always spots if it is being talked down to, and it is most suspicious of the 'high fallutin'."⁵¹ The ministry was keen to avoid "too much lecturing" and noted that its "propaganda has so often borne the hallmark of aloofness and it is that particular stigma that [it is] eager to remove."⁵² Mass-Observation confirmed in 1940 that the public reacted badly to films with "a preachy tone," noting that audiences preferred realistic films as long as "they reflect the situation *without the bias of intellectual better-off condescension* about less educated people, a bias which has reduced the mass potential of much documentary [production]."⁵³ This bias was heightened by accent and, of course, by language. *Documentary News Letter* advised the ministry that "the best way to carry on the work is to get in touch with the people direct."⁵⁴

In attempting to fulfill this function, filmmakers sought to foster national unity by presenting individuals and groups from different regional and class backgrounds, "the typical British citizens themselves," in a sympathetic manner.⁵⁵ In endeavoring to persuade the film industry to embrace the ordinary man or woman as the central character in shorts and features, *Documentary News Letter* commented that "the public is growing rapidly aware that the screen may entertain, not only by providing relaxation and escape, but by presenting the wartime drama of the common people" and that film could play a significant role in interpreting "to the nation a new, bewildering, yet real, world at war."⁵⁶ *Documentary News Letter* regretted that "in the British film industry the belief still persists that it is highbrowism or bolshevism to wonder if people who go to the cinema might not

⁴⁹ Harry Watt, quoted in "George Formby Wins the War," *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 20 July 1973. Located in British Film Institute (hereafter BFI) Subject File, "World War II and Film."

⁵⁰ TNA: PRO INF 1/292, Stephen Taylor, Home Intelligence, "Home Morale and Public Opinion," 4.

⁵¹ "Films and a People's War," 4; TNA: PRO INF 1/292, Stephen Taylor, Home Intelligence, "Home Morale and Public Opinion," 4.

⁵² TNA: PRO INF 1/679, Sir Arthur Willert to R. H. Parker, director of the Home Division, MoI, 28 April 1942, ref: AW/RHMC2; TNA: PRO INF 1/679, Rowntree minute, Morns (MoI Midlands) to Briggs, 29 April 1942.

⁵³ M-O A: TC 17/ 5/A, raw materials for report on letters to *Picture Goer Weekly*, May–November 1940, 1,536 letters analyzed. M-O A: "Home propaganda: A Report Prepared by Mass-Observation for the Advertising Service Guild," *Bulletin of the Advertising Service Guild*, no. 2 (London, n.d., ca. 1942), 33.

⁵⁴ "Films and a People's War," 4.

⁵⁵ Nicholas, *The Echo of War*, 239.

⁵⁶ "The Man on the Screen," *Documentary News Letter*, May 1940, 3.

want to see people like themselves on the screen.” War, it claimed brought “into sharp focus the social function of the cinema” and this in turn required a “re-consideration of traditional principles of story selection and treatment.”⁵⁷

Accent was to play a significant role in the redrawing of boundaries of authentic representation in British wartime cinema, partly produced by the influence and creative interpretation of the Griersonian documentary and partly driven by popular desire for change. Filmgoers complained of “the frightfully Oxford accents” that permeated British film production, observing that this was, in itself, sufficient to destroy “the possibility of the audience associating themselves with the people in the film.”⁵⁸ This chimed in with clamors from the documentarists who called for the recognition of the social function of film in wartime and beyond. Commenting on *Workers and Jobs*, a 1934 film depicting the daily routine of a labor exchange, they stressed how “profoundly moving” the ordinary could be, the key ingredient to the film’s success being the fact that the “dialogue was composed of conversations which pass every day across the counter . . . spoken by the actual men for whom the routine of questioning or listening or just waiting had become a part of everyday life.”⁵⁹ It was also in the filmmakers’ financial interests to include a wider variety of accents in their work, demonstrating “how rarely the voice of the people is heard in the cinema and [yet] how eloquent it can be.”⁶⁰ In the light of these observations, producers of short and feature films gradually began to incorporate some documentary techniques into fictional portraits on screen.

From the advent of the sound picture, film producers made little “attempt to create a specific cinematic form of enunciation,” preferring instead to “adopt the forms current in theatre and music hall.” With the studios not recognizing the uniqueness of the cinema, “the wealth of West End theatrical talent was put forward as a component of Britain’s potential for film production.”⁶¹ By 1940, commentators began to notice that this was an inappropriate judgment. *Documentary News Letter* noted that “it has long been the convention of the British stage and screen that the more admirable human qualities can be associated only with the ‘West-End’ manner and accent. Middle-class, working-class and dialect-speaking characters are conventionally endowed with comic or criminal traits, or they are portrayed with the improbable eccentricity of the ‘character’ actor.”⁶²

As this suggests, a shift had to occur: cinema “would demand, if not different actors, then certainly different skills from those of the theatres.”⁶³ This was particularly true of dialogue. Film had already established its cultural codes and forms of address, which had become familiar to audiences. Consequently, filmmakers faced considerable challenges in reconfiguring the language of the cinema to reflect a broader social base. First, they faced a challenge in finding actors who could carry off authentic portraits of working-class or regional characters. *Documentary News Letter* observed, “The number of actors and actresses who have had the

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ M-O A: TC 17/8/A, Film Reports and Memos, 1940–1943. MoI. Donnington report, 27 September 1941.

⁵⁹ “The Man on the Screen,” 3.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ellis, “Victory of the Voice?” 71.

⁶² “The Man on the Screen,” 3.

⁶³ Ellis, “Victory of the Voice?” 71.

opportunity to break from these conventions is few, and the rest will need time and new professional experience before they are capable of a convincing performance in a film of working-class, middle-class or true provincial life. If we are to make such films on a wide scale the problem becomes a serious one.”⁶⁴ Filmmakers discovered that one solution to the problem of unconvincing performances was to cast “‘real’ people without previous acting experience.” After all, they claimed, it was “easier to teach a glass-blower to act than to teach an actor to blow glass.”⁶⁵

Such an approach facilitated attempts to depict authenticity through a specific dialect, for contemporaries commented that accent was an essential component in fashioning a realistic feel to a film. However, producers found that “the conditions of studio production, nerves, and camera consciousness [destroyed] the spontaneity of the ordinary person” that they so wished to capture.⁶⁶ This self-consciousness revealed itself to the audience. One letter to *Picture Goer* in 1940 complained that ministry shorts employing the ordinary person were “boring,” as “‘the man in the street’ . . . however admirable as an individual, is a horribly inexperienced actor at any time and . . . falters, embarrassed, before the . . . camera.”⁶⁷ Adverse reaction to realism was also confirmed by Roger Manvell, a film critic writing for *Documentary News Letter* in March 1943, who observed:

After the slick and polished winner, the real people who play unpaid parts . . . look garish and awkward, like persons who bat and shy before a press photographer at some local function, or stare hollowly out of the pages of the illustrated society weeklies. . . . The pits and hollows of their unsmooth faces, accentuated by lighting and camera angle, were a new pictorial idiom. . . . And so these faces from the street and the factory, enlarged in close-up, smiling, self-conscious, real, were a shock to the people themselves, and caused the same laughter as the curate gets when he appears in a farce at some parish theatricals.⁶⁸

The audience’s laughter revealed their discomfort at the unfamiliar sight of everyday people on screen, distracting from their acceptance of the message conveyed by the film. This represented “a new translation of what was too familiar in daily experience to . . . the screen so long devoted to the strange glamour of the stars.” Filmmakers, when attempting to recreate the ordinary, had to learn to work within the “peculiar channels of screen idiom along which the public has learnt to receive its emotional impulses.”⁶⁹ Producers also had to understand and work around the tensions between, on the one hand, the audiences’ desire to broaden the social base of cinematic representation and, on the other, their discomfort with the process of changing the forms of cinematic address. It was for these reasons that the Home Publicity Sub-committee recommended that, although they remained committed to representations of the ordinary on film, Ministry of Information shorts needed to be produced in a studio with “popular artists” in the leading roles, as the films would inevitably have “greater propaganda value.”

⁶⁴ “The Man on the Screen,” 3.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ M-O A: TC 17/5/A, letters to *Picture Goer Weekly*, 1940 report. A.W.R., West Hartlepool, 15 December 1940.

⁶⁸ Roger Manvell, “They Laugh at Realism,” *Documentary News Letter*, March 1943, 188.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

The ministry added that “audiences, especially in present circumstances, expect to be entertained in the cinemas and, while this is no obstacle to instruction, exhortation and re-assurance, it makes it necessary that the films should be made in such a manner that the pill is gilded.”⁷⁰

This approach, however, appeared to be flawed, as demonstrated by the three ten-minute shorts commissioned by the ministry to prevent “careless talk” among the general population. Directed by John Paddy Carstairs in 1940, *All Hands*, *Dangerous Comment*, and *Now You’re Talking* highlighted some of the difficulties producers faced in attempting to connect with the average Briton and, in particular, the working classes.⁷¹ The shorts were carefully scripted, shot in a studio, and used the ministry’s “gilded pill” tactic of casting well-known stars such as John Mills, all of which undermined the overall impact of the films.⁷² Ultimately, the films failed to “move [their] audience[s] to a full appreciation of the dangers of gossip because the gossipers . . . never cease to be actors in the studio,” *Documentary News Letter* complained.⁷³ The public found little identification with “the old familiar faces playing the old familiar parts.”⁷⁴ Len England, chief film reporter for Mass-Observation, advised that “it is essential with the Ministry propaganda shorts that a ‘real’ atmosphere should be produced and this is sacrificed if the audience regard themselves as watching John Mills and not any sailor.”⁷⁵ Where the films appeared to be particularly wanting was in their failure to engage sufficiently with realistic accent and dialogue, reaffirming the fictional aspect of the film and adding to the lack of identification of the audience with the on-screen events. Mass-Observers in Donnington remarked on the Oxford or caricatured accents of the key characters, which, they stated, detracted from the overall impact of the film on the ordinary cinemagoer.⁷⁶ Commenting on another careless talk film, Paul Rotha’s *You’re Telling Me*, produced in 1941, the audience noted that “men don’t talk like that” and that “the dialogue . . . is unreal,” further linguistically distancing the viewer from the intended message of the piece.⁷⁷

The films’ failure to convince the public of their authenticity was compounded by a more serious outcome. The scenarios, accent, and characterization served to accentuate class difference, undermining the ministry’s claim that class division had been eradicated by the unity of a nation at war.⁷⁸ Mass-Observation noted

⁷⁰ TNA: PRO INF 1/251, “Five minute shorts,” Home Publicity Committee minutes, 13 November 1940. This is also reiterated in TNA: PRO INF 1/679, Rowntree memorandum on “Home Propaganda,” 25 April 1942, 3 (b).

⁷¹ A synopsis of these films can be found in Chapman, *The British at War*, 91. See also the original scripts and scenarios in TNA: PRO INF 6/524 (*All Hands*); INF 6/525 (*Dangerous Comment*); INF 6/526 (*Now You’re Talking*); INF 6/527 (*You’re Telling Me*).

⁷² See, e.g., “Anti-gossip Films Reviewed,” *Documentary News Letter*, May 1940, 17.

⁷³ “The Man on the Screen,” 3. Here the author is referring to *Dangerous Comment*.

⁷⁴ “Anti-gossip Films Reviewed,” 17.

⁷⁵ M-O A: TC 17/8/A, Film Reports and Memos 1940–1943. MoI. “Report on and Responses to MoI Short Films,” Len England, 10 October 1940. England also commented on the fact that Sebastian Shaw, Dorothy Higson, and Edward Chapman also star.

⁷⁶ M-O A: TC 17/8/A, Film Reports and Memos, 1940–1943. MoI. Donnington report, 27 September 1941, with specific reference to the “careless talk films.”

⁷⁷ M-O A: FR 639, *You’re Telling Me*, 5 April 1941. Also in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 435–37.

⁷⁸ TNA: PRO INF 1/292, Stephen Taylor, Home Intelligence, “Home Morale and Public Opinion,” 7.

that the poor reaction of audiences seemed “to derive *largely from the essentially upper- and middle-class attitude* of many of the films.”⁷⁹ Moreover, Mass-Observation added that even when the working class was portrayed on the screen in a favorable way, “they [were] not represented faithfully.”⁸⁰ Len England found that the authenticity of the depiction and audience identification played a key role in ensuring the propagandistic success of film. He noted that the most successful ministry short in this respect had been *Britain at Bay* (Harry Watt, 1940), which “provide[d] a bridge [between] middle and working classes.”⁸¹ Significantly, the film was narrated by J. B. Priestley, further underpinning the BBC’s belief that accent intensified the bond between presenter and audience. The short film program provided by the ministry was not only considered unpopular by some cinema owners;⁸² it also led to the belief that the Films Division of the Ministry of Information was out of touch with the public, particularly with those in the regions. As Mass-Observation noted in November 1940, “The Films Division with its highly intelligent personnel, in its very high building, tends to be easily out of touch with the rather simpler reactions of industrial Lancashire and rural Somerset,” adding that it was obviously “difficult for any ‘high-ups’ to keep in close or sympathetic touch with ‘low-downs.’”⁸³ Although the ministry and the film industry continued to make similar errors, they recognized that they needed to find new ways of bringing an authentic image of the ordinary to the screen that would contribute to their aspiration that cinema could both create and, to some extent, reflect the perception of a united nation at war.⁸⁴ They accepted that they needed to craft an effective portrayal of class and region, celebrating difference and yet emphasizing unity. Their early experiments demonstrated that in not offering authentic portraits, they were actually accentuating difference rather than eliminating it.

While short informational films failed to capture the popular imagination, feature films proved to be the staple entertainment for the masses at war. The documentary

⁷⁹ M-O A: FR 458, “Fifteen Ministry of Information Shorts,” Len England, 16 October 1940. Also reproduced in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 425. The original data and report can also be found in M-O A: TC 17/8/A, “Report on Audience Responses to MoI short films,” Len England, 10 October 1940.

⁸⁰ M-O A: FR 458, “Fifteen Ministry of Information Shorts,” Len England, 16 October 1940. Also reproduced in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 425.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁸² See, e.g., a report in *Kinematograph Weekly* on 17 July 1941, 1 (“M. of I. Shorts Shelved by Exhibitors”), which details some of the problems the ministry encountered attempting to distribute shorts. It should be noted this is a qualified statement. Mass-Observation records that some short films were popular, and this is supported in a more general sense by the Wartime Social Survey. See, e.g., TNA: PRO INF 1/292, “MoI Films and the Public. An Investigation by the Wartime Social Survey into Public Reaction to the Films made by the Films Division of the Ministry of Information,” 8 October 1941.

⁸³ M-O A: FR 446, “Social Research and the Film,” Tom Harrison, November 1940. Also reproduced in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 210.

⁸⁴ See, e.g., a report produced by Len England on the 1942 film *Next of Kin* dated 25 April 1942 in which England comments that “it failed for exactly the same point as the earlier careless talk films failed. . . . In the earlier report on the ‘careless talk’ films, I emphasized strongly the point that the working class were shown as the careless talkers, and the workers as spies. The result was that the careless talk seemed not to affect the man in the street who was, however, subconsciously offended by the idea that all spies were in his class of society” (M-O A: TC 17/9/D).

format was extended to a series of highly successful feature-length productions, Watt's *Target for Tonight* (1941) and Humphrey Jennings's *Fires Were Started* (1943) being two of the most popular and critically acclaimed. Significantly, both Watt and Jennings injected the concept of the people's war into their productions, specifically using dialogue, syntax, and accent to denote individual identity against the backdrop of common purpose. Contemporary observers hailed *Target for Tonight* as a "milestone in British film making . . . the real thing . . . actuality—grim, fascinating and engrossing with drama and chuckling humour both as spontaneous and real as the scenes inside Bomber Headquarters."⁸⁵ By employing the men of Bomber Command as the central protagonists, the film's producer, Ian Dalrymple, recognized that "in the pleasing projection of these fellows' personalities lies 50% of our propaganda value."⁸⁶ Watt deliberately inserted accented dialogue into the script to underpin the image of the collective: he recalled that he had specifically requested the inclusion of a Canadian dialect, as "after all, it was an Empire war," and a broad Scots accent to "give the impression of the mixture that was in the Services."⁸⁷ Here, as in other productions of the same genre and notably in Jennings's films, the various personalities and their "exploits and experiences" were located "within the narrative of a general process," with its focus on "an operation requiring the interdependence of many people—metaphorically at least, situating the individual within the national, exploring the place of the individual within the nation."⁸⁸ Moreover, the scripted dialogue in *Target for Tonight* highlighted marked contrasts between the language of the democracies and their authoritarian opponents. As historian David Welch has noted, the impact of the "stilted dialogue" of the Nazi "documentaries of intimidation," such as *Feuertaufe* (Baptism of fire; Hans Bertram, 1940) and *Sieg im Westen* (Victory in the west; Svend Noldan, 1941), was limited when compared to the human touch of British films such as *Target for Tonight*, "where aviators, soldiers, and civilians speak frankly about their feelings towards the war and the enemy."⁸⁹ Such distinguishing characteristics were also observed by Watt's contemporaries. Graham Greene commented that "everything is natural; there is none of the bombastic language, the bragging and the threats that characterize the German film *Baptism of Fire*."⁹⁰

By 1943, Watt's film contributed to Crown Film Unit's reputation for "its genius in interpreting the services to the world without undue emotionalism, vain glory or false modesty."⁹¹ *Fires Were Started* was very much a part of the same tradition. Like *Target for Tonight*, the film employed dialect and authentic dialogue to underpin the notion of the people's war. Jennings, its director, in particular, was a student of national and regional distinctions, as demonstrated by his 1943 short film *The Silent Village*, in which the director celebrated localized Welsh customs

⁸⁵ *Today's Cinema*, 25 July 1941, 5.

⁸⁶ TNA: PRO INF 1/210, Ian Dalrymple to Mr. Mercier, 15 May 1941.

⁸⁷ IWMS 5367/11, interview with Harry Watt, October 1981, reel 4.

⁸⁸ Higson, *Waving the Flag*, 208.

⁸⁹ David Welch, *Propaganda and the German Cinema, 1933–45* (London, 2001), 181–82.

⁹⁰ Graham Greene, quoted in K. R. M. Short, "RAF Bomber Command's *Target for Tonight*—1941—UK Royal Air Force; Documentary Film," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio, and Television* 17, no. 2 (June 1997): 181–218, 192.

⁹¹ *The Times*, 25 March 1943, 6.

and mores to accentuate the intolerance of Nazi *Kultur* and the uniformity it demanded. In Jennings's imaginary world in which a Welsh mining village, Cymgiedd, is overrun by the soldiers of the Reich and suffers the same fate as the Czech town of Lidice, his protagonists use language to resist occupation. The press book for the production stressed the "beautiful character study of the school-mistress, when she makes her moving appeal to the children under her care not to forget their native tongue, even if their language is henceforth forbidden at school."⁹² The striking contrast between the passionate, localized, and individual dialogue and the pervasive and conformist "voice of authority" pumped through the Nazi loudspeaker suggests the importance of the linguistic device to an understanding of the function of the film. Reaffirming the sense of the ordinary, Jennings chose to enlist the villagers of Cymgiedd as the "stars" of the film, its inhabitants living "the parts before the cameras just as they would had the events depicted really happened to them."⁹³ Given this particular mode of representation and the connection between expression, dialect, and the ordinary, it is unsurprising that Jennings paid close attention to the diction of his characters in his depiction of the auxiliary fire service in *Fires Were Started*.

Although Dalrymple, Jennings's producer, claimed that the director worked without a script, careful inspection of the treatments for *Fires Were Started* reveal a detailed record of Jennings's intention for the use of specific dialogue and accented language.⁹⁴ The dialects of Jennings's subjects were clearly marked in the text, from Johnny Daniels's cockney accent to "B. A. Brown, Liverpool-Irish" to the "tough little Scots fireman (name of Rumbold)."⁹⁵ Jennings illustrated the people's war by depicting the firemen "each independent of the rest, though linked by reinforcement."⁹⁶ A fusion of image and sound brought this vision to life on the screen, reflecting Jennings's "elaborate interest in technical experiment in the relationship between the visual and sound" as characterized by his earlier works such as *Listen to Britain* (1942).⁹⁷ In the fifth treatment of the film in January 1942, the sample passages of dialogue use syntax and colloquialisms to indicate individual characters' social background, adding to the grainy authenticity that Jennings hoped to achieve:

Jacko. I was just toasting me toes when a great red hot coal jumped out of the grate and fell plonk in the middle of the rug. Gave me quite a turn.

Vallance. And what did the wife say?

Jacko. Well, yer don't expect to find a blinkin' conflagration on your own hearth rug first thing after breakfast!⁹⁸

⁹² British press book for *The Silent Village*. Held at British Film Institute Library, London.

⁹³ Ibid.

⁹⁴ For Dalrymple's claim, see Anthony Aldgate and Jeffrey Richards, *Britain Can Take It: The British Cinema in the Second World War* (Oxford, 1986), 232.

⁹⁵ BFI Special Collections, Humphrey Jennings Collection, treatment for *Fires Were Started*, "N. F. S. Fifth Treatment," 27 January 1942. Also reproduced in *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, ed. Kevin Jackson (Manchester, 1993), 44.

⁹⁶ British press book for *Fires Were Started*. Held at British Film Institute Library, London.

⁹⁷ Daniel Millar, "Fires Were Started," *Sight and Sound* (Spring 1969): 100–104, 100.

⁹⁸ BFI Special Collections, Humphrey Jennings Collection, treatment for *Fires Were Started*, "N.F.S. Fifth Treatment," 27 January 1942. Also reproduced in Jackson, *The Humphrey Jennings Film Reader*, 45.

Allowing for improvised dialogue, Jennings “was delighted by the speech rhythms and turns of phrase of his predominantly cockney performers.”⁹⁹ That these additions to the final script came directly from Jennings’s subjects, “actual members of the Fire Service itself” and not “professional actors,” lent an air of authenticity to the film.¹⁰⁰ This approach led to a less than polished piece of cinema. Historian Kevin Jackson has pointed out that throughout the film, “lines are thrown away or muted,” and the nonprofessional actors can be distinguished by their “slightly unnatural rhythms of speech and movement.”¹⁰¹ Although he omitted the “foul language which was in everybody’s mouth at the time,” Jennings captured the essence of the people’s war and the ordinary man’s role in it.¹⁰² The stilted and rough diction and speech patterns presented authentic characters with which the audience could identify. This was specifically a propagandistic construct. For, as Daniel Millar observed, “though the people in the film are virtually playing themselves, neither is the characterization realistic. The personalities and their interactions are examined in detail; but the inevitable pettiness and squabbles in a small group of highly disparate people are not allowed to emerge,” pointing to the pseudoreality that finally surfaces from Jennings’s cinematic text, more a “blend of naturalism and classicism” than an authentic portrait of the nation at war.¹⁰³ In this respect, *Fires Were Started* fitted neatly into the overall vision of unity promoted by the ministry in its wider persuasive campaigns.

Although critics lauded Jennings’s 1943 production, audiences found the film to be “deplorably slow” in places, the tedium of the everyday life of the firemen proving to be unpopular.¹⁰⁴ Once again, this pointed to the tension between professed desires to depict the ordinary and the deeper needs of the filmgoer. It was increasingly apparent that cinematic styles had to be adapted to take such pressures into consideration. In order to tap into public desires, films needed to combine an element of the ordinary, notably by concentrating on individual characters, without making the subsequent representation overly dull. As the war progressed, producers of fictional film came to recognize that “everyday life does not lack drama,” and the cinema could just as easily reflect “the values and the ideals which make life worth living.”¹⁰⁵ *Documentary News Letter* had noted in May 1940, “Only the documentary makers have so far looked habitually beyond the lay figures of screen romance for their characters. It now becomes the task of the fiction film producer to people his world, not with synthetic aristocrats, outrageous eccentrics and the music-hall’s conception of the proletariat, but with the inhabitants of this country.”¹⁰⁶

In many ways, the feature film was the perfect vehicle for engaging popular

⁹⁹ Kevin Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings* (Basingstoke, 2004), 255.

¹⁰⁰ British press book for *Fires Were Started*. Held at British Film Institute Library, London.

¹⁰¹ Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings*, 266.

¹⁰² William Sansom, “The Making of *Fires Were Started*,” *Film Quarterly* 15, no. 2 (Winter 1961–62): 27–29. Cited in Jackson, *Humphrey Jennings*, 266.

¹⁰³ Millar, “*Fires Were Started*,” 102.

¹⁰⁴ TNA: PRO INF 1/212, memorandum to Mr. Jarratt (Crown Film Unit) from J. A. Bardsley, publicity manager, 7 December 1942, regarding a test screening of *Fires Were Started* in Preston.

¹⁰⁵ “The Man on the Screen,” 4; John Grierson Papers, Special Collections, University of Stirling, G4:20:4, “Films and the War,” speech by Grierson to the National Film Society of Canada, n.d.

¹⁰⁶ “The Man on the Screen,” 3.

desires while redefining the social function of the cinema. It was, after all, the people's medium, the projector of their fantasies as well as their conscience, and, as such, it had a far better chance of appealing to the masses than the short film: as Mass-Observation noted, producers of short films and documentaries were perceived to be "in a world of their own," divorced from popular trends.¹⁰⁷ Although some filmmakers believed that feature and nonfiction films were entirely distinct in their aim and purpose, documentary techniques were increasingly integrated into mainstream fictional productions, fusing the real and the imaginary.¹⁰⁸ Three contemporary feature films thought to be the most poignant and effective representations of the people's war—Noel Coward's *In Which We Serve* (1943), Frank Launder and Sidney Gilliat's *Millions Like Us* (1943), and Carol Reed's *The Way Ahead* (1944)—drew inspiration from the documentary form. Indeed, documentarist Paul Rotha claimed the initial idea for *Millions Like Us* as his own, contending that his film *Night Shift* (Jack Chambers, 1942) formed the basis for Launder and Gilliat's production.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, as filmmaker Basil Wright recognized, features had begun to involve themselves in the social issues spearheaded by the documentary movement, notably by short films dealing with the postwar world and plans for education, housing, and employment, such as *Dawn Guard*, *Post 23* (Ralph Bond, 1941), and *ABCA* (Ronald Riley, 1943). Moreover, by 1942, feature and documentary teams often shared personnel, Michael Balcon recruiting distinguished documentarists such as Alberto Cavalcanti and Harry Watt to work at Ealing Studios.¹¹⁰

Millions Like Us, like the documentaries, carved social identity through accented language, for the experiences of its characters underline regional and class as well as gender distinctions. The press book proudly announced that, in her experience as a factory girl, Celia, the central female protagonist, meets "every type, rich and poor alike . . . Gwen, a Welsh girl whose wise-cracking remarks hide a kind heart; Annie, who comes from Lancashire; and Jennifer, a rich society girl who finds her changed life difficult."¹¹¹ The film revealed a complex picture of the people's war that was full of tensions and uncertainty, one in tune with the audiences' contemporary understanding of national unity.¹¹² On the one hand, coming from very different backgrounds, the factory girls find companionship. On the other hand, social and regional difference drives a permanent wedge between Jennifer and the object of her affections, Charlie, the factory foreman. Significantly, in the closing scene in which Charlie and Jennifer resolve to go their separate ways after the war, class distinction is driven home through the use of accent:

¹⁰⁷ M-O A: "Home Propaganda: A Report Prepared by Mass-Observation for the Advertising Service Guild," *Bulletin of the Advertising Service Guild*, no. 2 (1942): 31.

¹⁰⁸ Basil Wright, *The Long View: A Personal Perspective on World Cinema* (London, 1974), 109.

¹⁰⁹ Interview with Rotha in Elizabeth Sussex, *The Rise and Fall of British Documentary* (Berkeley, 1975), 140–41.

¹¹⁰ Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 219.

¹¹¹ British press book for *Millions Like Us* (1943). Held at British Film Institute Library, London.

¹¹² Evidence for the contemporary understanding of social division at the end of the war can be found in M-O A: FR 2275, "Character in War and Peace," August 1945; M-O A: FR 2270A, "The General Election," July 1945; M-O A: FR 2278B, "Feelings about the Peace," August 1945. For a more detailed discussion of these issues, see Jo Fox, *Film Propaganda in Nazi Germany and Britain: World War II Cinema* (Oxford, 2006).

Charlie. The world's made up of two kinds of people. You're one sort and I'm the other. Oh, we're together now there's a war on—we need to be. What's going to happen when it's over? Shall we go on like this or are we going to slide back? That's what I'd like to know! And I'm not marrying you until I'm sure. I'm turning you down without even asking you. D'you understand?
Jennifer. [*Mocking his accent*] Aye. Oh aye.

This sequence, in which social barriers could not be overcome, would have had a particular resonance with contemporary audiences, reflecting the view that the people's war had been exposed for “the sham that it always was.”¹¹³ In this sense, *Millions Like Us*, in its tensions and contradictions, could be said to be the contemporary “mirror of modern life as it may well be so known by many families throughout the land.” *The Cinema* contended that this was “the secret of the picture's certain appeal.”¹¹⁴

Nevertheless, other films took a more optimistic view of the potential social outcomes of national unity in times of crisis. Like *Millions Like Us*, *The Way Ahead* had been developed out of the documentary form as a fictional extension of an army instruction film, *The New Lot* (Carol Reed, 1943). Reed's production created an image of a fighting force, its officers and men, drawn from all walks of life, fused by the common experience of the draft and battle. Reed's film, like *Millions Like Us* and *In Which We Serve*, did not deny class and regional tensions. Rather, it set them within the context of a redefined concept of the people's war, in which division was not denied but a collective goal allowed a temporal suspension of the prewar world, aptly demonstrated in the scene in which the conscripts meet for the first time. Here, as in other productions of this genre, social status is indicated through accented language and class-specific dialogue and forms of address. This is seen in the exchange between the upper-middle-class Herbert Davenport (Raymond Huntley) and the working-class Ted Brewer (Stanley Holloway) that emphasized individual identities:

Davenport. By the way, Parsons [*his office junior*], I think it would be, shall we say, less embarrassing for both of us if we forget and disregard my difference in status which may have existed at the store? I must say I think it was, to put it mildly, thoughtless of the powers that be to allow such a situation to arise. . . .

Brewer. [*Enquiring after a seat*] This free?

Davenport. I believe so [*continuing his conversation about the firm*]. I've taken the matter out of the firm's hands and written directly to my M.P.

Brewer. [*Interrupting*] 'ho's he?

Davenport. I beg your pardon!

Brewer. 'ho's he, your M.P.?

Davenport. Sir Henry Chalmers-Thompson.

Brewer. Ow, ol' liver lips! Talked for two 'ours an' 'alf on the Brompton sewage scheme. . . . Couldn't 'ear 'imself for the snores.

Davenport. Do you know Sir Henry?

Brewer. I'm in the 'ouse.

¹¹³ M-O A: FR 2270A, “The General Election,” July 1945.

¹¹⁴ *The Cinema*, 24 September 1943, 8.

Davenport. You're a Member?

Brewer. Nah. I worked on the boilers. . . .

Davenport. All the same, I don't think you should refer to Sir Henry in the way you did.

Brewer. No? Listen, there's only one good man ever got into Parliament.

Davenport. Who would that be?

Brewer. Guy Fawkes! [*Davenport raises an eyebrow disapprovingly*]

In praising the film's characterization and authenticity, critics frequently made reference to the "flick and flippancy of the dialogue," which added to the realism of the production, its characters presented without condescending "caricature, affectation or facetiousness."¹¹⁵ Indeed, critics recognized that the film reflected the public's perception of themselves; C. A. Lejeune concluded that "as an account of British speech and behaviour . . . [*The Way Ahead*] scarcely puts a foot wrong."¹¹⁶

Such realistic dialogue and speech patterns opened up a market for British feature films; British productions appealed to nations concerned about the prevalence of modern American "slang and accent" distorting the English language and "hastening" the process of "Americanisation."¹¹⁷ Moreover, as historian Mark Glancy has suggested, "Hollywood's Britain was seldom an average or ordinary Britain."¹¹⁸ Films such as *Waterloo Bridge* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1940), *Random Harvest* (Mervyn LeRoy, 1942), and *Mrs. Miniver* (William Wyler, 1942) hardly reflected the "grey drabness" of the British city or the ordinary experience.¹¹⁹ Although *Mrs. Miniver* was a popular success in both Britain and the United States, it also presented a skewed portrait of the British class system, despite its attempts to redress Hollywood's vision of British society. Naturally, the documentarists responded most vehemently. Edgar Anstey, writing for *The Spectator*, went as far as to suggest that the film was "unconsciously pro-fascist propaganda" in its suggestion that the middle class were "the backbone of Britain" and denying the average Briton a respected place in the people's war.¹²⁰ As the *Sunday Pictorial* pointed out, "Mrs. Miniver's maid was 'a giggling half-wit', the maid's boyfriend 'an imbecile' and the station master 'an amiable fool.'" Did "these ghastly caricatures honestly represent the workers of Britain"? Within the film, accent performed a dislocating function. For while Wyler elicited convincing accents from the majority of his cast, Kay Miniver's husband, Clem (Walter Pidgeon), is distinctive in his use of the American idiom.¹²¹ Nevertheless, the unrealistic aspects of *Mrs. Miniver* did not detract from its popularity either in the United States or, significantly, in Britain. This exposes a seemingly explicit tension between popular desires, patterns of consumption, and critical acclaim, stressing the multiple needs of a population at

¹¹⁵ *The Times*, 7 June 1944, 8.

¹¹⁶ C. A. Lejeune, "London's Movie News," *New York Times*, 16 July 1944, X3.

¹¹⁷ *The Times*, 16 April 1930, 13.

¹¹⁸ H. Mark Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain: The Hollywood "British" Film, 1939–1945* (Manchester, 1999), 3.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹²⁰ Edgar Anstey, *The Spectator*, 17 July 1942, and *Documentary News Letter*, August 1942. Quoted in Glancy, *When Hollywood Loved Britain*, 155.

¹²¹ Walter Pidgeon was actually Canadian, but this distinction was not recognized by contemporaries. See, e.g., *The Times*, 8 July 1942, 6.

war. Escapism, documentary, and realism could coexist, a point that is highlighted by a study of Coward's *In Which We Serve*.

Like *Millions Like Us* and *The Way Ahead*, Coward's film, the most successful British film of 1943 and voted the eighth most popular film of the war years, found contemporary popularity mainly because of the public's perception that he had managed to create a realistic depiction of the ordinary set within the fictional tale of the HMS *Torrin*.¹²² Although the opening sequence saw Leslie Howard proclaim that "this film is about a ship," the real interest lay in the ship's occupants, and specifically in the film's central characters, Captain Kinross (Noel Coward), Chief Petty Officer Hardy (Bernard Miles), Ordinary Seaman Blake (John Mills), and their families. In bringing these characters to life on the screen and denoting their social status, Coward relied partly on the set and costume but also on language, dialogue, and accent, and this played an important role in affirming the audiences' identification with the Kinrosses, Hardys, and Blakes, who represented their class and region but who were presented as individuals set within the whole.

Given that, in preparing for the film, Coward studied documentaries "with close attention," it is unsurprising to find a range of class and regional dialects within *In Which We Serve*, especially as its central aim was to convince the public of the necessity to set aside, but not to ignore, conventional British differences and to work together for the war effort.¹²³ As Mass-Observation noted, the public appreciated the fact that "the characters [in the film] were very true to life, each was representative of a class type," recognizing that the film depicted "patterns of different classes united in common loyalty."¹²⁴ In this way, *In Which We Serve* intended to reflect the stratification of society as understood by the British people. Bernard Miles, who played Hardy in the film, recalled that "there were three decks in British society. There was a top deck and they'd been through Eton and wonderful schools, and then there was a lower deck. Of course, they were all cockneys and they didn't know much . . . and then there was a middle deck and that was how the film worked out."¹²⁵ Miles detailed that the actors were fitted to the roles the public associated them with in order to accurately represent each class: from Celia Johnson as the upper-class wife of Kinross to John Mills as Shorty Blake, "every inch the true blue, wise cracking cockney," each "fitting the three decker society of which [they] were products."¹²⁶

Miles confirmed that Coward "was wonderful at . . . understanding the class system."¹²⁷ As Aldgate and Richards point out, although *In Which We Serve* endorsed preexisting social structures, in contemporary terms this did not "invalidate the emotional truth of the film," especially as the concepts that underpinned it, as well as wider governmental propaganda, were concerned with establishing a

¹²² Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 206.

¹²³ Wright, *The Long View*, 109.

¹²⁴ M-O A: 1943, directive replies on favorite films, in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*. Comment 1 is from a clerk, thirty-four, from Belmont (284). Comment 2 is from a mother and part-time typist, twenty-seven, London (264).

¹²⁵ IWMS 11845/1, interview with Bernard Miles, 30 minutes recorded in 1986.

¹²⁶ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1 October 1942, 28; IWMS 11845/1, interview with Bernard Miles, 1986.

¹²⁷ IWMS 11845/1, interview with Bernard Miles, 1986.

consensus rather than promoting revolution or significant change.¹²⁸ As *Documentary News Letter* stressed, “The social structure of the British community is presented as a fixed and settled structure; nowhere is there any suggestion that the present war represents a revolution not only in thinking but in class relationships. This point must not be misunderstood, because Coward is one of the first people to put across with truth and realism the character and behaviour of the three different income groups.”¹²⁹ This was ultimately the key reason behind the film’s success.

Nowhere are these distinctions more apparent than in the Christmas scene, and notably in the toasts to the HMS *Torrin* over lunch, where the three tiers of Coward’s society are juxtaposed. Their dialogue, syntax, and accent further stressed individual and distinct class identities. The sequence begins in the working-class home of “Shorty Blake.” The linguistic form denotes the social status of the family, phrases such as “them kids,” “it don’t do no such thing,” and “we was in the Red Sea” reaffirming delineated identities. In the middle-class home of Petty-Officer Hardy, class identity is also reaffirmed through language or, more specifically, the challenge to language:

Hardy. [Having leave at Christmas] is little short of a bloody miracle.

Kath. Walter! How can you? You know I don’t like you using that word!

Hardy. Be that as it may, that’s a mighty expressive word. What’s more it’s been bound up with naval tradition since times immemorial.

Guest. I have heard it whispered in the R.A.F.

The sequence concludes in the home of Captain Kinross, where his wife makes an eloquent and heavily accented toast to her “permanent and undefeated rival,” the HMS *Torrin*, commenting that “it is extraordinary that anyone could be so fond and so proud of their most implacable enemy, this ship” and adding, rather regally, “God bless her and all who sail in her.” Despite the suggested class differences, the celebration of the ship and observance of national traditions surrounding the holiday unite all the characters. However, each man appears within his own familial and class contexts.

Audiences of 1942 could easily identify with this approach. As an accounts clerk from the Royal Air Force at Orkney said, “It was obviously a film of things as they are, and not just a string of hashed up ideas from the back-room boys of the film world with false heroics and sentiment.” A civil servant from Morecombe added that there was “pathos, tragedy, strong emotion in it, but no exaggerated sentiment and no glamorous film stars stepping out of its story to show off their ‘charms.’”¹³⁰ This confirmed *Kinematograph Weekly*’s view that the film did not need to resort to “blondes or other synthetic subterfuges” to be a popular success.¹³¹ The audience could identify with the characters’ “heroism in times of special

¹²⁸ Quotation from Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 208.

¹²⁹ *Documentary News Letter*, October 1942, 143–44. Quoted in Aldgate and Richards, *Britain Can Take It*, 209.

¹³⁰ M-O A: 1943, directive replies on favorite films, in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 271–84.

¹³¹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 1 October 1942, 28.

danger [and] their ordinary lives as part of a nation at war.”¹³² Most tellingly, a welfare officer and nurse from Glasgow commented, “As truly British, I could visualise it happening to me, or any of my friends and the reactions would have been the same.”¹³³

Accent and dialogue played a considerable role in mediating the realism so carefully crafted on screen by Coward and his team, who were acutely conscious of them during the production and filming stages. As associate producer Anthony Havelock Allen recalled of Michael Powell and Emeric Pressburger’s 1946 production *A Matter of Life and Death*, many films focused on the officer class: “Nobody in heaven talked with cockney accents, all the angels were clearly upper-class.”¹³⁴ The fact that *In Which We Serve* broke from that mold featured heavily in the film’s promotional literature. The press book, distributed to journalists and cinema owners, stressed that the film had captured “the mood and manners of the English people in their everyday lives . . . with no suspicion of caricature or exaggeration.” Drawing attention to the mannerisms and accents of the protagonists, it commented that “the distinction between the smoother, and perhaps more superficial, behavior of the upper-class officers and their wives, and the less mannered talk and actions of the ordinary seamen is brought out clearly, but without distortion.” Special attention was given to Miles’s southwest accent, with the press book urging the press and cinema owners to remind the audience of “his . . . rustic monologues,” emphasizing that Miles had long been “a keen student of English dialects.”¹³⁵ Noncaricatured accents added to the film’s realistic feel. The film’s producers and actors knew that in order for the story of the HMS *Torrin* to be convincing, characters and their mannerisms had to be accurate. In this respect, *In Which We Serve* proved to be a considerable success. The performances of the principal actors, in particular Miles and Mills, were thought to be so realistic that *The Times* warned that they were “in danger of getting themselves taken for granted,” blending seamlessly into the sense of the ordinary cultivated by the producers.¹³⁶ Miles emphasized that the film crew recognized that “the British people were aware of these things” and that the cameramen were inspired by the Griersonian style of documentary, as evidenced by the opening sequence of the film that focuses on the shipyard.¹³⁷ The producers went to considerable lengths to make the film look and sound authentic, drawing on the expertise of the documentarists.¹³⁸ They also brought in navy men on “survivors’ leave” to fill the parts of extras.¹³⁹

Having “real men” on the set also helped Coward perfect the dialogue and speech patterns in the film. Although some audiences reacted badly to Coward himself, and in particular to his “Oxford accent,” many found the dialogue and

¹³² M-O A: 1943, directive replies on favorite films, in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 278. Here the comment is from a social worker, forty-one, London.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, 264.

¹³⁴ Interview with Sir Anthony Havelock Allen, June 1990, in *An Autobiography of British Cinema: as Told by the Film-makers and Actors Who Made It*, ed. Brian McFarlane (London, 1997), 291.

¹³⁵ British press book for *In Which We Serve*, 15. Held at British Film Institute Library, London.

¹³⁶ *The Times*, 24 September 1942, 6.

¹³⁷ IWMS 11845/1, interview with Bernard Miles, 1986.

¹³⁸ Wright, *The Long View*, 109.

¹³⁹ IWMS 11845/1, interview with Bernard Miles, 1986.

accent convincing and authentic, with one respondent praising the film because “the language was not emasculated.”¹⁴⁰ Authentic speech, however, did cause some problems for the production team. At times, realistic depictions required some “common language” or swearing: Miles used the word “bloody,” and at another point in the film the line “here come the bastards back again” is used. In 1940, *Kinematograph Weekly* encouraged the use of common language, impressing upon filmmakers that “the message to be delivered must be direct and not obscured by ‘arty’ fussiness. . . . Symbolism may make its appeal to the few cultured minds but propaganda, to have its widest and strongest appeal, must speak what a former generation called ‘the vulgar tongue.’”¹⁴¹ In this way, realism, accent, and language became synonymous.

Although the film’s use of swearing undoubtedly added to the realistic feel of the film, this decision created some problems with both home and foreign audiences, even leading to comment in the House of Commons.¹⁴² For some contemporary observers, such as Manvell, the language used by the sailors in the film was not realistic enough, although he admitted that such realism caused uncomfortable reactions among the audience at times:

The language used by the men on the raft whilst the Jerries of *In Which We Serve* shoot them up is mild compared with what a voluble man would use in the actual circumstances. Yet an unsophisticated audience knowing full well the peril and stress of the situation will laugh at words like “bastard” and “bloody.” Why? Because they come from an artificial medium, a screen, a speaker, and they are magnified, are heard in a packed hall. Such words heard by anyone with two ears alert, in any place where people congregate, are none the less secret words, taboo words for half-private use only. . . . Result, laughter due to mild shock. . . . Swearing is a continuous mild joke. . . . It is irritating to hear the laughter, but it is ten to one that the average provincial British audience will produce it.¹⁴³

It became apparent, then, that the film’s greatest achievement in providing convincing characters and dialogue also proved to be its greatest problem and attests to the sensitivity of language within film.

Accent and realistic dialogue added to the authenticity of a film at a time when audiences wanted to find figures on the screen with which they could identify, notably from the outbreak of war until 1942. In short, the media during the war “opened up to people’s voices.”¹⁴⁴ This was integral to the accommodation of the everyday within British wartime cinema. From 1939 through 1942, genuine representations of the ordinary were relatively popular among audiences, although

¹⁴⁰ M-O A: 1943, directive replies on favorite films, in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 234–41.

¹⁴¹ *Kinematograph Weekly*, 3 October 1940, 4.

¹⁴² See, e.g., “Hays Office Objects to Great British Film,” *News Chronicle*, 2 December 1942, British Film Institute subject file, “censorship”; *The Times*, 24 December 1942; *The Times*, 10 December 1942, 8. A report also appeared in *The Scotsman*, 10 December 1942, British Film Institute subject file, “censorship.” For more discussion on this, see Anthony Slide, *Banned in the USA: British Films in the United States and Their Censorship, 1933–1960* (London, 1998), 83.

¹⁴³ Manvell, “They Laugh at Realism,” 188.

¹⁴⁴ John Blaxendale, “‘You and I—All of Us Ordinary People’: Renegotiating ‘Britishness’ in Wartime,” in *Millions Like Us? British Culture in the Second World War*, ed. Nick Hayes and Jeff Hill (Liverpool, 1999), 295–323, 322.

this was difficult to achieve in both short and feature films. At best, films merely reinforced existing class distinctions while stressing the need for unity rather than “sameness,” corroborating Sonya Rose’s conclusion that portraits of Britain at war “celebrated diversity, implicitly advocated tolerance and recognized Britain as a class- and gender-divided society but denied that it mattered to national unity—to the image of the British as essentially one people.”¹⁴⁵ At worst, as in the case of the Ministry of Information’s “careless talk” shorts, class division was accentuated rather than subordinated. As historian John Blaxendale has contended, “any attempt to define” class, regional, and even national collective identity “simply revealed the depth of historical class divisions and the difficulty of communicating across them.” He concluded that “in the end, the ‘we’ who vainly resolved to hang out the washing on the Siegfried Line were simply, as Priestley optimistically put it, ‘you and I—all of us ordinary people.’”¹⁴⁶ In short, as Rose observed, “the pull to unity was haunted by the specter of division and difference.”¹⁴⁷ War did not “erode all those prejudices deriving from differences of class, gender and ethnicity.”¹⁴⁸ Equally, film did not and could not reflect “what people were actually doing, saying and feeling,” preferring instead to create an imagined popular opinion within which the people’s war was little more than a cultural construct, albeit a powerful one.¹⁴⁹ It follows that images of the people’s war should not be read as realistic depictions of the national spirit. After all, “cinema, radio, war artists, Pathe News and Picture Post were not passive recording angels but active agents for promoting a certain frame of citizen mind.”¹⁵⁰ To be successful in this task, the portrait of the people’s war had to reinforce existing social values and fractures rather than seek to revolutionize them.

However, for all the realism presented in films relating to the people’s war, the popularity of the Hollywood escapist film and the Gainsborough melodramas seemingly created a tension between images of “us ordinary people” and the desire to escape the mundane.¹⁵¹ Did the average factory girl want to be more like Gwen Price, Annie Earnshaw, and Jennifer Knowles of *Lauder and Gilliat’s* film *Millions Like Us* or did they want to be like the Hollywood stars of the silver screen? After all, Mass-Observation reported in 1940 that “Joan Crawford was the fourth most important factor in determining the headwear of Cockney and Lancashire girls.”¹⁵² Glamour was increasingly popular throughout the war years, and it was the glamour of Hollywood that appealed to British audiences. As one cinemagoer recalled, “I preferred Hollywood stars in the forties. It had mostly to do with glamour. No matter what our girls did they just couldn’t hold a candle to the American girls.

¹⁴⁵ Sonya Rose, *Which People’s War? National Identity and Citizenship in Wartime Britain, 1939–1945* (Oxford, 2003), 6.

¹⁴⁶ Blaxendale, “‘You and I—All of Us Ordinary People,’” 322.

¹⁴⁷ Rose, *Which People’s War?* 286.

¹⁴⁸ Steven Fielding, “The Good War: 1939–1945,” in *From Blitz to Blair: A New History of Britain since 1939*, ed. Nick Tiratsoo (London, 1998), 34.

¹⁴⁹ Rose, *Which People’s War?* 23.

¹⁵⁰ José Harris, “War and Social History: Britain and the Home Front during the Second World War,” *Contemporary European History* 1, no. 1 (1992): 17–35, 20.

¹⁵¹ For a further discussion of this issue, see James Chapman, “British Cinema and ‘The People’s War,’” in Hayes and Hill, *“Millions Like Us”?* 33–62.

¹⁵² M-O A: FR 446, “Social Research and the Film,” Tom Harrisson, November 1940. Also reproduced in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 212.

I remember I went to see a British musical called *London Town* [and] the attempt at glamour was so awful it just made us giggle.”¹⁵³

Love on the Dole (John Baxter, 1941) was by far the grittiest of all depictions of the ordinary in British cinema of this period, but it was a box-office flop.¹⁵⁴ Mass-Observation believed that the most successful films were “nearly always Cinderella stories—the poor little girl who marries Prince Charming who has wealth and position and good looks.”¹⁵⁵ Female audiences were not, then, necessarily dreaming of John Mills as Shorty Blake and a life as an ordinary seaman’s wife. For while cinematic methods had adapted to public desires for realistic depictions of the contemporary on screen, public desires themselves were undergoing a process of change driven by war weariness and the aspiration of audiences to escape the real by using the cinema as a gateway to the fantastic. By the end of 1942, as the toll of war increased the demand for more escapist cinema, it was no longer enough for the Ministry of Information to assume that identification only took place where audiences were confronted with themselves. A more powerful identification could be felt when the ordinary was placed within the extraordinary, for instance, the popularity of the Gainsborough melodrama, which drew high box office figures throughout 1943 and beyond, affirming the cinema’s place as a “dream palace.” Mass-Observation noted that “it seems reasonable to believe that the reason for [the popularity of Cinderella stories] is that in the opening sequences the audience can identify itself with the hero or heroine, and follow them more easily in the imagination in their subsequent adventures.”¹⁵⁶ It is unsurprising, therefore, to find that, in the early 1940s, audiences turned to the Hollywood “dream factory” or to the British Gainsborough melodramas to escape the monotony of the everyday.

To what extent is the distinction between realism and escapism a false dichotomy? Despite all the publicity surrounding the authenticity of *In Which We Serve*, Coward viewed the film rather differently, resisting categorization by the film press. Commenting that modern entertainment should not be seen as either escapist or realist, as such divisions were “foolish,” he noted that he considered “all entertainments in essence escapism because they practically always are concerned with something people don’t themselves do in their everyday lives.” “*In Which We Serve*,” he continued, “was just as escapist in its way as *Blithe Spirit*.” “But,” he informed C. A. Lejeune, “if you must press the distinction between escapism and realism, if you will draw a line between entertainment that involves war and that avoids war, I think it should be a very great pity that both should not be used. Certainly a true account of war is highly desirable. But a good eighteenth-century

¹⁵³ Jackie Stacey, *Star Gazing: Hollywood Cinema and Female Spectatorship* (London, 1994), 113. Quoted in McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures*, 432.

¹⁵⁴ M-O A: FR 2120, “The Film and Family Life,” 13 June 1944. Also reproduced in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 298. For more on *Love on the Dole*, see Caroline Levine’s article in this issue: “Propaganda for Democracy: The Curious Case of *Love on the Dole*,” *Journal of British Studies* 45, no. 4 (October 2006): 846–74.

¹⁵⁵ M-O A: FR 2120, “The Film and Family Life,” 13 June 1944. Also reproduced in Sheridan and Richards, *Mass-Observation at the Movies*, 297.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

operetta is also desirable.”¹⁵⁷ Here, Coward highlights the complexities of popular patterns of reading cinematic texts, public consumption, and desires. Distinct productions, such as the fictional and documentary genres, could coexist within the wartime film program, providing for fluctuating and individual needs of the population at war. Moreover, films could simultaneously be read as escapist and realist and could respond to fantasies even in the depiction of the real, drawing on the multifaceted popular interpretations of the people’s war and, significantly, its relationship to the postwar world. Moreover, accent and language played a fundamental role in this process of both representing the “ordinary” and the “extraordinary.” For not only could it affirm the identity of the familiar; it could also introduce the unfamiliar, whether regional or international, through dialect.

In addition, confronting the meaning of national unity in relation to the “new Jerusalem” was, in many senses, engaging with “ordinariness” whilst exploring a fantasy that countered the memory of the Depression and the social inequalities of the 1930s. For all the conceptual problems that the “people’s war” raised within contemporary British society, in which division was recognized and embedded, the ideal of national unity became a prominent aspect of the hopes for a postwar consensus and featured heavily in the cinematic discourse, functioning as a means not only of reinvigorating the nation in its final push for victory but also of reinventing Britain as the “Land of Promise” in the popular imagination. At this level, the concept of the people’s war became a hugely powerful force. In representing acceptable visions of the collective, within which individual and multiple identities were allowed to operate, film not only offered an eloquent and persuasive argument for wartime unity but also tapped into the popular desire for a new postwar social structure that built upon the war experience. By doing so, the cinema provided “a screen for contemporary anxieties and dilemmas, where particular representations and representational repertoires are also specifically produced and shaped.”¹⁵⁸ In every sense, wartime cinema provided a space in which the complexities of defining identities could be worked out, in which fantasy and the “ordinary” combined to allow the everyman to become a hero, paving the way for the distinctive master narratives that dominated the British cinema of the postwar world.

¹⁵⁷ Noel Coward, interviewed by C. A. Lejeune, “How Coward Did a Five-Fold Job,” *New York Times*, 14 February 1943.

¹⁵⁸ Eley, “Finding the People’s War,” 838.